4-2020

Ordinary disasters: On unexceptional flooding in LA's San Fernando Valley

Sayd RANDLE
Singapore Management University, sprandle@smu.edu.sg

Citation

RANDLE, Sayd. Ordinary disasters: On unexceptional flooding in LA's San Fernando Valley. (2020). *MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW*. 59, (2), 237-248.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cis_research/96

ORDINARY DISASTERS: ON UNEXCEPTIONAL FLOODING IN LA'S SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

SAYD RANDLE

California is a place that floods. The fires and the earthquakes and the droughts tend to dominate the headlines and the popular imagination, sure. But the rains also bring chaos and destruction here. The wet winter of 2017, for instance, wrecked hundreds of homes along Northern California's Russian River, caused landslides in Big Sur, and trapped dozens of motorists in floodwaters on Southern California freeways. While that year's most-feared disaster—the failure of the massive Oroville Dam—failed to materialize, the waters still led to over a billion dollars of damage and the evacuation of nearly 200,000 Feather River Valley residents.

Some observers, steeped in the panicked coverage of the state's 2011–2017 drought, were shocked by the images of vehicles floating in two-and-a-half feet of water in the United States' second-most populous city. Historians and climate modelers, however, were not among that number. Those focused on Southern California point to the walloping Los Angeles floods of 1938, 1934, 1914, and 1889 to illustrate the recurring nature of floods in the region. Occasionally, they'll throw in a reference to San Diego's 1916 deluge, which followed the city council hiring a self-described "rainmaker" to end a drought, for whimsy and good measure.

But by far the most-referenced example of rain's potential power in the state was and is the "Great Flood" of 1862, which turned most of the Central Valley into an inland sea and rerouted the course of the Los Angeles River. That inundation, the result of nearly seven straight weeks of rain, is now mobilized with some frequency to frame discussions of the conditions Californians should be worried about in the (even more) climate-changed

future. It serves as the basis for theARkStorm scenario, a model prepared by the U.S. Geological Survey in 2011 to predict the effects of a so-called thousand-year storm—that is, one at the scale that data suggest will come once per millennium—on the state. The swatches of blue covering the ARkStorm report's detail maps of Sacramento, Silicon Valley, Stockton, and South Los Angeles are sobering, particularly given that the model incorporates the state's sprawling flood management infrastructure into its flood predictions.

Talking about flood as California's "other big one," otherwise known as a plausible natural disaster with the power to cause damage equivalent to that caused by a massive earthquake, does important work in capturing the imagination. I came to appreciate its pull last spring, when I taught a seminar course called Californians and Water and assigned students an open-ended creative project that could address any of the dozens of topics we'd covered over the course of the semester. Nearly a quarter submitted short stories about narrowly escaping death-by-ARkStorm, piling on the melodrama and watery metaphors. Because of its sheer scale, epic flooding is not hard to picture and/or to fear, even amidst the palm trees of Los Angeles. It's just so big as to feel, on some level, obvious.

To be honest, though, I've begun to question the wisdom of focusing on any of the "big ones" when it comes to natural disasters. Or rather, I'm worried about letting them crowd out non-epic disasters from our discussions of environmental harms. I don't question that climate change will continue to make enormous, record-setting fires and floods and droughts more and more common. But I do fear that ignoring the more quotidian flare-ups and inundations and dry spells and snowstorms and other threats, the unevenly distributed "slow violence" that causes painful and sometimes fatal exposure, will allow a slew of dangerous environmental inequities to persist below the radar. Because as environmental justice activists have been reminding us for generations now, stop waiting for some damn event, the action is ongoing, the harm is already happening, even when it doesn't make good TV. The history of flooding in one relatively uncelebrated corner of LA is instructive for understanding how such mundane disasters can persist for decades—and why it matters for how we think about environmental threats.

* * *

I have to confess: it was a story about some corpses that drew me to this particular history of flood risk. Back in 2015, I was doing anthropological fieldwork for a dissertation on the shifting politics of LA's water supply, driving to my interviews with activists, and engineers, and homeowners under signs above the freeway that read "SERIOUS DROUGHT HELP SAVE WATER." Shortly before she told me the story about the bodies floating down the hill, Mona (a pseudonym I use in accordance to my research protocol) and I had been laughing about how it felt like it might never rain again. She had lived in the northeastern San Fernando Valley for her whole forty-seven years of life, Mona told me, and she could remember earlier droughts, sure, but never anything like *this*. Impressive storms or floods, though, could you recall any of those? I asked. And that's when she mentioned it, the massive storm, something like forty years ago, when the water wrenched corpses from the ground and deposited them on peoples' yards.

I was incredulous, and also a student living and breathing my research project, so I spent that evening in the online archive of the *LA Times*. Mona's story was confirmed by an article dated February 11, 1978, which features this singular opening:

> Thirty graves yielded up their dead early Friday when a section of the mountaintop Verdugo Hills Cemetery collapsed at the height of the storm. Torrents of water, mud and boulders sent the corpses and coffins tumbling into a residential street and backyards in Tujunga. One nearby resident found three corpses in his yard. Another body was recovered three-quarters of a mile from the cemetery at Pinyon Ave. and Parsons trail. ("Deluge Sweeps 30 Bodies from Graves into Yards")

Reporting in the days that followed revealed that the cemetery had been plagued by management problems in the years before the downpour and attributed the bodies' slide to the improper use of fill material on the hillside. There was human error involved in this particularly macabre disaster. But there was also a powerful storm at play, part of a series that killed twenty people between February 5 and 14 of that year. Humans (in particular, their

questionable development choices) and precipitation combined forces to create this ugly outcome.

Keeping that socioenvironmental read on the distribution of responsibility in mind, I think it's striking to consider that when dozens of engineers gathered in September 1980 to discuss recent flooding in the LA geological basin, they concluded that the storm responsible for moving the bodies was only a "ten-year storm." That is, it was a storm, based on measurements of rainfall volume and distribution, of the intensity that could be expected once a decade, which, in flood management terms, is a truly ordinary damn storm, one that should be far below the threshold of infrastructure built to contain floods and yet one that took lives and destroyed dozens of homes in the San Fernando Valley.

It was the recognition of this mismatch—unremarkable storm, devastating destruction—that turned my own focus to the persistent nature of inundation in this section of LA. But my own interview transcript shows that I was dense to need dead bodies to lead me there. Mona had already laid it all out, describing her lifetime of wet seasons in the Valley. "I remember the torrential rains," she told me that day, before continuing:

> Coming down Lanark [a local thoroughfare], you would try to drive on it, and you're floating. You'd feel it teeter, then your cars were literally kind of floating down and they'd grab pavement every once in awhile . . . I remember we were like an hour and half late for school because the train underpass on Woodman [another local road] had flooded.

Our conversation revealed that this scale of inconvenience was common in her neighborhood, expected during the winter rainy season. The skies opened, the roads became impassable, and you were late (or unable to attend) school or work. Disruptive flooding of this scale was unremarkable in Mona's memories, as in those of her neighbors. "It's just how they built this area," one told me with a shrug.

* * *

To be clear, "this area" lies within the City of LA, a metropolis of more than four million that has inspired no small number of popular and scholarly

studies. But "this area" also describes neighborhoods more than twenty miles north of downtown LA's skyscrapers, over the Hollywood Hills in the northeastern San Fernando Valley. While the Valley, a landmass of 260 square miles and home to more than a million and a half residents, has been a cultural touchstone for some time (see Frank Zappa's 1982 hit "Valley Girl," Cher's house party misadventure in *Clueless*, Kardashians, etc.), Laura Barraclough's 2011 *Making the San Fernando Valley* is widely credited as the first full-length scholarly monograph dedicated to its history. In many senses, the details of the Valley's development have been largely invisible within the mainstream narrative of LA. Looking more closely at that history as it relates to flooding illuminates how and why ordinary floods were built into the lives of Mona and other residents of the Valley's northeastern edge.

Not so long ago, the entire San Fernando Valley was understood as LA's rural hinterland. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Valley was a sparsely settled agricultural landscape close to but not part of the growing city to its south. By that point, the Mexican cattle barons who had wrenched control of Valley lands from local indigenous groups had themselves been largely dispossessed by a small coterie of Anglo businessmen. Though farming in the Valley was encouraged by the city and its boosters, struggles to procure sufficient irrigation water initially limited the expansion of cultivated acreage. The conditions of possibility for the landscape's development changed drastically with the completion of LA's Owens Valley Aqueduct in 1913. The pipeline's enabling legislation forbid the sale of its water to customers outside the City of LA, a prohibition that directly precipitated the 1915 annexation of 170 square miles of the Valley into the city. Planted acreage expanded rapidly in the years that followed, as citrus, olives, grapes, and other sun-hungry crops flourished.

By the time of the annexation, the flood-prone lands of the northeastern Valley had emerged as its *de facto* "minority district," per Barraclough. Much of this settlement was concentrated around Pacoima, a town founded by Tennessee transplant Jouett Allen along the Southern Pacific railroad line in 1887. The name he chose means "rushing waters" in the language of the Tongva, a local indigenous group. Allen came to appreciate the appropriateness of the moniker in 1891, when the Pacoima Wash (a flashy tributary of the LA River) flooded and destroyed several of the settlement's

original structures. Conceived as a suburban retreat for the wealthy, the combination of this periodic flooding and the real estate bust of the early 1890s set the area on a different path.

As well-to-do Anglos departed, nonwhite railroad workers and farm laborers settled along the railroad tracks, where they were able to purchase small plots of land. Lacking the restrictive housing covenants that prohibited nonwhites from buying or renting in many sections of the city, the area developed as a peripheral, multi-ethnic hub, home to substantial Black, Latino, and Nikkei populations by the middle of the twentieth century. But despite the construction of high dams in the hills above Pacoima, local flood risk never abated. The city's infamous 1938 flood was particularly destructive, washing out several Pacoima homes and bridges. Though these inundations spurred the Army Corps of Engineers to construct the massive Hansen Dam in 1940 as part of its flood control network, the Pacoima Wash continued to overspill its banks during bad storms.

Accounts of the area in the middle decades of the twentieth century suggest that, despite sitting within the city's borders, it lacked many basic urban infrastructures and services during this period. This kind of underdevelopment plagued much of the Valley during its transition from an agricultural landscape to a densely settled suburban space. But the situation in Pacoima was extreme. Reverend Hillary Broadous, who moved to the neighborhood in 1946, recalled the conditions that greeted him in a 1985 interview:

> Pacoima had one paved street that was Van Nuys Boulevard when I came in the 1940s. It had one paved street. There was no sewers, there was no sidewalk. I, along with others, walked the street, and got a petition for street lights and sidewalks . . . and there was no mail service, that kind of thing. Just the phone company.

Neighborhood improvement projects brought streetlights and sidewalks to the area in the years that followed. But adequate flood management remained elusive. LA County voters passed major bond measures to fund local flood control infrastructures—primarily concrete storm drains—in 1954, 1958, 1964, and 1970. But while the extreme flood risks of the northeastern

Valley were well known by agency engineers, other areas were prioritized for these projects. By the end of the 1970s, the last of the bond money was gone. The Flood Control District was left struggling to fund ongoing maintenance of its existing network, a challenge exacerbated by the shrunken tax revenues caused by a 1978 California tax-reduction measure. In 1980, LA City Engineer Donald Tillman reported to the city council that an additional $211 million of basic flood control projects, most of them for the San Fernando Valley, would be needed to adequately protect the city's residents. He went on to note that in some areas of the eastern Valley, inadequate infrastructure meant that heavy rains remained life-threatening events, an unacceptable situation. Even so, major infrastructural investments in these areas were not forthcoming. The response of City Councilman Marvin Braude, quoted in a 1980 *LA Times* article, is telling:

> The city has to draw a fine line between what is an areawide responsibility to control flooding damage, what might be viewed as a more local subdivision responsibility, and finally what might be viewed as a private owner's responsibility to provide storm protection.

The devolution of the responsibility for flood management to individual property owners is striking, particularly given that many of these unprotected areas were home to some of the city's most disadvantaged residents—and that most wealthier areas were well protected by the drain network. Even so, major infrastructural investments in these areas were not forthcoming. In a 1983 interview with the *LA Times*, Flood Control District engineer Gary Hartley acknowledged that the eastern sections of the San Fernando Valley suffered from the county's worst street drainage problem, and things were unlikely to improve soon: "There will be deficiencies in the Valley in the next 10 to 15 years," he told the reporters.

The deficiencies outlived this prediction. In 2001, for instance, schools in Sun Valley, a neighborhood just south of Pacoima, announced a new busing program to tackle the persistent problem of "rainy day absences." Reporting from Arminta Elementary School amidst a downpour, a *LA Times* journalist described the surrounding roads as "a virtual moat" and made clear that this situation was tediously familiar:

> The seasonal swamping—the effect of an inadequate storm drainage system—has been going on so long that some children who once sloshed through the knee-deep water to get to class are now parents here, ferrying their children past the same flooded intersections. ("Buses to Dry Up Rainy Day Absences")

Four years later, winter rains brought something more dramatic to this neighborhood: a 200-foot sinkhole that took the life of Rory Shaw, a city worker investigating the crevasse. Following his death, Ileene Anderson minced no words in describing the situation to a reporter: "There is simply no infrastructure. They rely on the streets to move the water. It always floods."

* * *

To be clear, flood infrastructure, including the sprawling system built out in LA County in the twentieth century to manage flashy conditions, is not infallible. The presence of an extensive network of check dams and storm drains and debris basins is not necessarily sufficient to prevent inundations in a nasty storm. Plenty of environmentalists now criticize this "single-purpose" approach to managing runoff, particularly the extent to which it limits groundwater recharge. But the story of the Pacoima and the surrounding neighborhoods of the northeastern San Fernando Valley is clearly one where flood control infrastructures, single purpose or otherwise, didn't even have a chance to work, largely because they weren't built.

Without overstating conclusions about conscious intentionality, it is worth considering the structuring role that ideas about race and class have long played in the city's approach to these areas as well as the ways in which this developmental lag fits a larger pattern of the neighborhoods. As noted above, many standard city services and infrastructures were slow to arrive in this area, a longtime hub for nonwhite Angelenos. Through the middle of the twentieth century, such neglect allowed parts of the landscape to maintain a more rural character than the rest of the city. These arrangements pleased some residents, particularly those with roots in less urbanized areas. Pacoima native Mary Helen Ponce's memories of the area from the 1940s reflect such affection. In her 2006 memoir *Hoyt Street*, she ascribes

the neighborhood's persistent rural character to norms and memories that traveled with its residents from their childhood homes in Mexico:

> People in Pacoima, I often thought, needed more space than did those in upwardly mobile San Fernando, where homes had sidewalks and paved streets, but sat close together, as if afraid to breathe too much of their neighbor's air. On Hoyt Street most residents had once lived in Mexican ranchitos and had a greater need for land. In large double lots, they planted fruit trees, vegetable and flower gardens, and assorted hierbas that also grew in Mexico. (7)

Ponce's comments suggest that, to many in Pacoima, the neighborhood's spatial arrangements during this period signaled a particular rural Chicano identity and perhaps some nostalgia for former ranchland homes south of the border. While newcomers were often keen to introduce amenities that signaled membership in a modern metropolis, some longtime residents valued elements of the neighborhood's undeveloped character.

Outsiders' accounts of the local conditions tended to be harsher and frequently mingled damning characterizations of the neighborhood's space with racist depictions of its residents. In their 1939 report, surveyors from the federal Homeowner's Loan Corporation portray Pacoima as a crumbling relic, populated by laborers and their freely grazing goats:

> This is a Mexican settlement which has developed upon the location of an old abandoned subdivision which was platted and promoted some 25 years ago as a high class suburban resort. The enterprise involved the expenditure of considerable capital, but was unsuccessful. The promoters went broke and the subdivision was abandoned. Mexican farm laborers moved in and occupied the old residences and today goats graze in the streets and cactus plants are greatly in evidence. The area has no residential significance and is merely set up as a matter of record. (HOLC 1939, Security Map of Los Angeles County, Area No. D-2)

Writing in 1955, *LA Times* reporter Ed Meagher offers a more detailed description of the neighborhood, presenting it as a dusty, flood-prone junkyard:

> The section swirls in dust across the railroad tracks on the north side of San Fernando Road in Pacoima. It spills out over 110 blocks. A smear of sagging, leaning shacks and backhouses framed by disintegrating fences and clutter of tin cans, old lumber, stripped automobiles, bottles, rusted water heaters and other bric-a-brac of the back alleys . . . No curbings, no paved sidewalks or streets. Only dusty footpaths and rutted dirt roads that in hard rains become beds for angry streams. ("Pacoima Area Revamped by Awakened Citizenry")

Meagher organizes his account around the story of P. M. Gomez, a longtime Pacoima shop owner and community leader. At the urging of a white city building inspector, Gomez convinced his neighbors to rehabilitate their sagging homes and to petition the city for paved roads. "A new spirit began to stalk the area—a spirit of community pride," Meagher writes of the transition, implying, of course, that residents had previously lacked such feelings and initiative. The association of the blighted, underdeveloped landscape with its poor, nonwhite population is suggested throughout the piece. The description of the local reaction to the infrastructural improvements is particularly unsubtle in implying the residents' backward character: "The neatness and cleanness of the new streets and sidewalks have been in themselves a challenge to homeowners grown apathetic to thoroughfares ankle deep in mud or dust." Similar tropes surface in a 1966 report from the City of LA's Department of City Planning. The report critiques the neighborhood for its "lack of civic pride" and "substandard home maintenance." Such accounts served to reinforce the public image of the northeast Valley as a dilapidated place and its nonwhite residents as the primary cause of these conditions.

The formal archive is, perhaps unsurprisingly, quiet on these matters. But an interview with a career LA County flood control engineer, who started his career developing storm drain plans in 1964, offers some acknowledgment that it's long mattered *which* people must live with floods,

big or small. "You knew where the flooding was, we'd mapped where all the flooding was, so you knew where all the major things were," he told me. "My first dose of political reality came when we put a bond program together though," he continued before trailing off. He didn't want to say too much but admitted that some voices were louder than others in getting priorities set and that it wasn't a coincidence that Sun Valley still had no storm drain by the time he retired in the early 2000s. The voices of the working-class Latinx parents carrying their children to school across flooded streets had just remained a bit too faint to win the day.

* * *

There's an interesting late act twist to this story. California has weathered drought after drought since the 1980s, and the City of LA has become increasingly anxious about its ability to supply residents with adequate water. To local water managers, the unruly floodwaters of the northeastern San Fernando Valley have come to look like something other than a hazard in recent years: a potential source of new water for the city. The flood-prone areas sit above an aquifer, and if engineers could just find a way to slow the flow and get the stormwater into the subsurface basin, then LA's wet years could be creating an underground reserve for its dry ones. Documents like the city's 2016 Stormwater Capture Master Plan target the northeastern Valley for a wide range of new water capture projects, all of which seek to both reduce flooding and increase the city's water supply. Given that climate modelers project a future LA where overall rainfall remains relatively stable (if flashier and even less consistent), capturing these flows for future use is now seen as smart, forward-looking policy.

For most of LA's metropolitan history, the northeastern San Fernando Valley has played the role of a peripheral landscape within the borders of the City of LA, a space where certain forms of environmental disorder are, if not explicitly allowed, halted very slowly. Particular patterns of state neglect in the form of a light regulatory presence in land use decisions and lagging infrastructural investment mark the landscape. Not coincidentally, for decades, the northeastern Valley has served as the space within LA where people and land use practices excluded from other parts of the city could establish themselves. Considering its history as a marginal space illuminates the significance of the landscape's ongoing transformation into a carefully

mapped and managed landscape. A space that long absorbed the people and substances undesired (though relied on) by the city's elites is being reimagined as an environment to be rationally managed to procure a crucial resource. In both of these arrangements, the city relies on the northeastern Valley as a space that plays a constitutive function, not unlike the hinterland landscapes that provide electricity or water for major cities. But the newer imaginary clearly entails a dramatic shift in both material flows and the state's gaze within the terrain.

There is reason to believe that this new wave of attention and investment could reduce the frequency of floods in this area, both big and small. But the course of events suggests that, without the carrot of this newly valuable water, water managers could have looked past these ordinary inundations in perpetuity. The northeastern Valley is flood-prone by nature, made more so through development decisions. Flooding is accepted and expected here, newsworthy only when it becomes deadly (or, in very rare cases, rouses the dead). It's one of so many marginal landscapes where people have lived with the burden of small disasters for generations. Climate change will intensify these conditions, making the "big ones" more likely. But for so many people, this will just be a bit more of the same. An ARkStorm, after all, will seem less extraordinary when you've spent your winters walking out of your front door and into a moat of churning water.